

# Relief planes load in Ocala, fly to Irma-damaged south Florida

By [Fred Hiers](#)

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AERObridge, Sheltair Aviation and Crossroads Alliance are staging at the city's airport

In a normal week, Russell Wright would be getting ready for his College of Central Florida management classes before school starts each Monday. Instead, on Friday, he was stuffing bagged groceries and bottled water into his single-engine plane on a hot Ocala tarmac.

The 49-year-old professor and head of the college's bachelor's degree program had had enough of watching television and seeing millions of Floridians without power and food rotting in their homes — if they had a home — following Hurricane Irma.

So, he put his piloting skills to use with AERObridge, a global organization of volunteer pilots who fly needed supplies to areas impacted by natural disasters. On Friday afternoon, Wright was loading his Piper Comanche with food and water at the Ocala International Airport.

The airport was chosen, in part, because of its central location and infrastructure resources. It is one of a handful of regional Florida general aviation airports that is part of AERObridge relief efforts throughout Florida post-Irma.

From Ocala, AERObridge flights are going to airports in Homestead, Lakeland, Fort Myers, Jacksonville and Key West.

The Ocala airport started working with its fixed-based operator, Sheltair Aviation; Crossroads Alliance, which organizes the flights and deliveries; and AERObridge on Wednesday.

There were about 50 flights by Friday, involving 20 planes. The relief project is expected to continue into this week.

“I’m doing it because I can. And people need help,” Wright said. “I felt helpless doing nothing.”

Although Florida and the federal government have thrown their full weight behind getting help to victims of the hurricane, “We can do it faster and go places they might not be able to go, such as unimproved airports,” Wright said.

While pilots have volunteered an assortment of planes, most own smaller, single-engine planes that can carry a pilot and a passenger or two. In addition to fuel, Wright's plane can carry about 500 pounds of cargo. His first destination Friday was Homestead, in south Florida. He said

Crossroads Alliance, which organizes the food pickups and dropoffs, would tell him where to fly next.

Friday's flights cost Wright about \$250-\$300 in fuel. Then there is the wear and tear on his plane. Sheltair sold him the fuel at a discount, which is part of the company's contribution to the project.

"I'll keep doing this until I run out of supplies to deliver, they don't need me, or I can't pay for it anymore," Wright said.

Ocala International Airport director Matthew Grow said he was glad the city's airport could play such an important role in getting food and supplies to devastated areas.

"It's really a wonderful thing this organization chose our airport," he said.

The airport's runway is 7,400 feet long. The modern tower went up 2010. The airport has plenty of apron space, where planes can be loaded and checked before flights. The airport sits on 1,550 acres.

"We have so much room; it's not impacting the normal operations of the airport," Grow said.

As many Florida roads remain congested with traffic, planes can deliver supplies and avoid those problems, Grow said. In addition, smaller planes don't need the runway length larger planes do.

Ocala's airport, "with its proximity to the rest of the state, major thoroughfares and because of the city's investment in (the airport's) infrastructure, is what made the airport a logical choice," Grow said.

Crossroads Alliance works with Florida's Emergency Support Function and area non-profit organizations in the areas impacted to help get supplies and services to where they are needed.

On Friday, Feed the Children provided the food. Bryan Morgan of the alliance organized the pilots, food deliveries to their planes, and destinations out of the Ocala airport.

David Bowers, a 58-year-old Atlanta area resident, is a Delta Airlines pilot who typically flies a technologically advanced Airbus 320 with 180 passengers. On Friday, he was piloting his Cessna 182 out of Ocala, carrying about 500 pounds of macaroni and cheese, cans of chicken soup and packaged fruit.

He weighed each paper bag of groceries on a bathroom scale before he put them into his plane. He stuffed nine cases of water onto and in between rear seats. In 15 minutes of loading, Bowers ran out of room before he hit his 550 pound weight limit. He flew to Homestead. He was scheduled to fly for Delta on Saturday and said he was hoping to hitch a ride with another airline back to his plane so he could do another AERObridge run.

As to why he was helping, he said, “Because I’m a Christian and a neighbor. I want to help those people who need help.”

Sheltair said in a prepared statement that it was a privilege to play a role in the relief effort. Sheltair is a privately-owned aviation development company that operates 17 fixed-base operations.

“These AERObridge missions are demonstrating what general aviation is capable of following disasters that threaten our communities,” said Sheltair Chief Operating Officer Warren Kroeppel in the news release. “We are providing every and all resources to support that function with special honors to our employees who are, themselves, recovering from Irma.”